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SUBJECT: GOVERNING COALITION BEGINS DISCUSSING
REFERENDUM SHORTCOMINGS

(U) Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Following their stoic congratulatory remarks immediately after the vote, pro-government officials are starting to talk publicly about fraud during the November 27 constitutional referendum. National Assembly Speaker Artur Baghdasarian launched a wave of discussion with allegations of fraud and claims that he possessed a packet of "proof" of vote-rigging. His governing coalition colleagues, after blasting him for moving ahead of the pack, have made watered-down admissions that there may have been problems during the referendum. Prime Minister Andranik Markarian even entered the fray on December 17 acknowledging that ballot stuffing occurred. While political leaders began to indicate that the November 27 referendum may have been less than free and fair, Armenia's Prosecutor General came out on December 20 with statements dismissing reports of violations and the legal standing of such claims. End Summary.

BAGHDASARIAN: FIRST TO COMMENT

2. (SBU) National Assembly Speaker Artur Baghdasarian surprised his governing coalition colleagues and the media with his December 1 statement acknowledging serious instances of ballot box stuffing during the November 27 constitutional referendum. In a series of newspaper and television interviews, Baghdasarian insisted that it was "obvious" that there was organized ballot stuffing during the referendum. He blamed unspecified individuals close to the election process with a "criminal mentality" that stops at nothing to "please the bosses." (Note: Minister of Defense Serzh Sargsian responded to press questions December 2 about the referendum results with the comment, "I believe that the referendum passed. I believe that more than one third [of the voters] said 'yes.' I believe that this is the clear will of our people." End Note.)

COALITION PARTNERS BLAST BAGHDASARIAN

3. (SBU) Counterparts from the Republican and Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF/Dashnak) parties blasted Baghdasarian for his public criticism but also stopped short of calling the elections free and fair. Their criticisms were more about Baghdasarian's methods and motives than about the substance of his accusations. Baghdasarian's coalition partners, the Republican Party and the ARF Party, were clearly unhappy with Baghdasarian's statements. Senior ARF MP Levon Mkrtchyan criticized Baghdasarian in the press, saying that his Orinats Yerkir Party should have shared its concerns with its government allies before going public with the information. He accused Baghdasarian of lending more weight to opposition allegations that the vote was blatantly rigged. Galust Sahakyan, senior Republican Party MP, followed the ARF's lead and criticized Baghdasarian's move in the press. Comment: While conspiratorial media outlets were quick to point to this public exchange as an indication that the coalition was (again) about to crumble, there does not appear to have been an immediate split as a result of the scuffle. End Comment.

THE "PACKET OF PROOF" OF VIOLATIONS

4. (SBU) Baghdasarian's top lieutenant, MP Mher

Shahgeldyan, told the Ambassador December 9 that Baghdasarian planned to file a complaint with Armenia's Prosecutor General, and confirmed in a conversation on December 19 that Baghdasarian had sent an "information package" to the Prosecutor General including proof of electoral fraud. While he would not elaborate on the nature of the information, he indicated that it was a thick packet of documents including evidence that authorities had tampered with the vote. Baghdasarian later told the media that he had received "facts" about widespread vote-rigging and was passing the data to relevant law enforcement authorities. While the extent of Baghdasarian's "proof" and the depth of his commitment to spearhead the post-referendum investigation are still unclear, his comments were the first by a pro-government politician admitting to problems during the November 27 referendum.

PM ADMITS TO, DOWNPLAYS BALLOT STUFFING

15. (SBU) Prime Minister and Republican Party leader Andranik Markarian broke his silence about the constitutional referendum, admitting during a December 16 speech (during the party's annual conference) that ballot stuffing had occurred during the referendum. The PM noted that the members of the election commissions, in which all three coalition parties were represented, should have registered instances of vote rigging, which they did not. According to Markarian, it would be impossible to present claims of ballot stuffing to the Prosecutor General or the Constitutional Court. Republican Party number two and Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly Tigran Torosyan also told us that there were electoral violations, but insisted that a rumored number of "stuffed" ballots (more than 750,000 according to opposition claims) was exaggerated. According to Torosyan's calculations, the fraud had no real impact on referendum outcome.

DASHNAKS CALL VOTE BIG NEWS OF 2005, DESPITE FRAUD

16. (SBU) Deputy Speaker of the parliament and ARF leader Vahan Hovhannisyan also recently went public about the Constitutional referendum. In a December 20 press conference, Hovhannisyan admitted that there were instances of electoral violations on November 27. According to Hovhannisyan, the positive outcome of the referendum offset any damage that electoral violations may have caused. Hovhannisyan called the referendum the "most important achievement of the government and the people in 2005." Hovhannisyan told us he welcomed the opportunities offered by the new constitution, but admitted that the electoral process could and should have gone much better.

HOVSEPYAN DISMISSES CLAIMS AND SPEAKER'S "PROOF"

17. (SBU) Prosecutor-General Aghvan Hovsepyan said on December 20 that Armenian law-enforcement bodies lack the concrete facts necessary under Armenian law to prosecute anyone in connection with electoral fraud on November 27. According to Hovsepyan no individual or GOAM office had presented his office sufficiently detailed information on violations which would trigger a criminal investigation. Hovsepyan informed the press that he had received a letter from Armenian National Assembly Speaker Artur Baghdasarian on December 19 regarding electoral violations. According to Hovsepyan, however, Baghdasarian's letter contained no specific facts regarding violations, but only included media reports.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) Emerging statements about problems during the November 27 referendum by governing coalition leaders and the Prosecutor General indicate that official Yerevan is only beginning to discuss this question. There does not appear to be a synchronized approach to the issue by coalition parties (as evidenced by the clumsy reaction of the ARF and Republicans to Baghdasarian's early accusations of fraud). We expect that the GOAM will talk more about what may or may not have happened on November 27 and the road ahead as the political elites begin to form their pre-election strategies in advance of the 2007 parliamentary elections.
GODFREY